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The Social Production of Altruism: Motivations for Caring Action in a Low-Income Urban Community

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Abstract

Contemporary social science paints a bleak picture of inner-city relational life. Indeed, the relationships of low-income, urban-residing Americans are represented as rife with distress, violence and family disruption. At present, no body of social scientific work systematically examines the factors that promote loving or selfless interactions among low-income, inner-city American individuals, families and communities. In an effort to fill that gap, this ethnographic study examined the motivations for altruism among a sample of adults (n = 40) who reside in an economically distressed housing community (i.e., housing project) in New York City. Content analyses of interviews indicated that participants attributed altruism to an interplay between 14 motives that were then ordered into four overarching categories of motives: (1) needs-centered motives, (2) norm-based motives deriving from religious/spiritual ideology, relationships and personal factors, (3) abstract motives (e.g., humanism), and (4) sociopolitical factors. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

Positive psychology; African Americans; Urban; Class; Altruism; Prosocial; Social capital

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Introduction

Historically, low-income urban communities have been represented as nihilistic and morally chaotic spaces, and as spaces where there are limited reserves of social capital (e.g., social trust and intimate social networks). In keeping with this representation, public as well as social science discourses on urban life have focused disproportionately on explicating the evolution of distress, disrupted family relationships, interpersonal and community violence, and moral marginality among urban-residing adults (Gabbidon and Peterson 2006; Kubrin 2005; Reisig and Cancino 2004; Sommers et al. 2006; Thompson and Massat 2005). Missing are systematic examinations of the factors that contribute to positive interpersonal relationships among low-income Americans who live with the challenges of urban life. In this ethnographic study we broaden the discourse about urban life by examining the factors that motivate individuals who live and work in a low-income housing community to engage in routine as well as extraordinary acts of altruism. In this effort to elucidate the factors that motivate individuals to behave altruistically we revisit prevailing social psychological theories of urban prosociality, and juxtapose these theories against explanations for altruism offered by our participants.

On Altruism

The word “altruism” is a part of a larger lexicon of human goodness. However, its meanings and its link to related terms (e.g., helping) have not always been clear. Altruism derives from the Latin root “alter” meaning “other.” Consistent with that root, Post (2002) defines an altruist as “someone who does something for the other and for the other's sake, rather than as a means to self-promotion or internal well-being…” (p. 53). Oliner (2002) asserts that behavior is altruistic if it meets four criteria: it “(1) is directed toward helping another, (2) involves a high risk or sacrifice to the actor, (3) is accompanied by no external reward, and (4) is voluntary” (p. 123). In contrast to Oliner, however, Batson (1994) distinguishes between altruism and two related terms: helping and self-sacrifice. Altruism, Batson asserts, has “the ultimate goal of increasing the welfare of one or more individuals other than oneself” (p. 606). Batson notes that helping behaviors, although often altruistic, cannot be assumed to be intrinsically altruistic because they are not always intended to enhance the welfare of others (e.g., giving money to a homeless person so that one does not have to witness his/her distress is helpful but not altruistic since the intent was not to improve the lot of the person in need). Finally, Batson contrasts altruism, which references the improved lot of the recipient, with “self-sacrifice” which references the costs paid by actors for their actions. Batson notes that it is not the fact that someone suffers a cost that defines his/her actions as altruistic. Instead, actions are altruistic if the actor intended to improve the well-being of the recipient. In keeping with Post's and Batson's definitions, in this study we define altruistic behaviors as actions that are (1) voluntary, (2) undertaken without an a priori interest in receiving internal or external rewards, and (3) intended to enhance the welfare of others.

What Motivates Altruism?

The study of altruism has deep roots in the humanities, theology, and the social sciences. Evolutionary theories suggest that altruism (“`biological altruism”) is motivated by a pre-wired, biological thrust to ensure the genetic survival and reproductive success of genetically similar others (Darlington 1978; Wilson and Kniffin 2003). Economic theories, (e.g., exchange theories) offer that people engage in seemingly selfless behaviors when such behaviors yield personal or communal benefits, and when the benefits of action outweigh the costs (Collard 1978).

Social scientists assert that altruism has contextual, social-cognitive, affective, and relational roots. More specifically, situational conditions (e.g., natural disasters) motivate individuals to care for others (Baron 1992; Hovannisian 1992; Oliner 2002). Altruism also may be motivated by deeply rooted ideological leanings including politically liberal, humanistic, cultural and religious beliefs, values, and norms (Baron 1992; Hovannisian 1992; Johnson et al. 1989; Lee et al. 2005; Midlarsky et al. 2005; Monroe 2002; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Oliner 2002; Peterson and Seligman 2004; Wuthnow 1991). Lee et al. (2005) assert that ideologies, values and norms that place a premium on caring for others may inform a sense of personal responsibility for the fate of those who are in need, and may become such defining aspects of the self that they prompt us to act in ways that are consistent with what we profess to value (i.e., to behave altruistically). Altruism also has been theorized to be a distinctive personality style (Batson 1991; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Rushton et al. 1981). Further, altruism may have roots in such emotions as guilt, moral outrage (Montada 1992), empathy and perspective-taking (Batson 1991; Batson and Shaw 1991; Lee et al. 2005; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Underwood and Moore 1982).

Finally, altruism has relational roots. Some individuals engage in altruistic action as a result of having established positive relationships with particular individuals or members of particular social identity groups (see Baron 1992; Hovannisian 1992 for examples). Further, some scholars suggest that individuals may be influenced by the selfless values of models such as parents (Gagne and Middlebrooks 1977; Lee et al. 2005; Oliner and Oliner 1988, 2002). The social-cognitive pathways via which models influence altruism have not been delineated fully, however, there is some evidence that people may mimic the altruism of models to whom they are securely attached (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005) and toward whom they feel positively (Rosenhan 1970).

Oliner (2002) and Smolenska and Reykowski (1992) divides prosocial (e.g., altruistic) motives into three categories: allocentric, normocentric, and axiological. Allocentric (“other-centered”) motives center on an awareness of and sensitivity to the needs and the fate of persons who require aid. Normocentric motives derive from personal, family, religious, cultural or community values regarding the importance of helping. Axiological motives are rooted in abstract moral and ethical ideals (e.g., justice). Oliner (2002) and Smolenska and Reykowski (1992) note that prosocial behaviors result from an interplay between these three groups of motives. Although these categories are potentially useful, it is important to note that they were developed from studies of the prosocial (e.g., helpful) actions of individuals who rescued others during the Holocaust. Following Batson's (1991) caution about the distinction between helpfulness, self-sacrifice and altruism, we note that the helpful acts of rescuers were not always altruistic. Indeed, as Smolenska and Reykowski (1992) aptly remind us, some rescuers may have been motivated by a quest for fame or a need for excitement. As such, it is unclear whether these categories will effectively capture the motives for altruism among low-income urban-residing adults in the U.S.

Urban Prosociality

Although interest in altruism has deep roots, it was the brutal murder of Catherine “Kitty” Genovese in New York City in March of 1964 that ignited scholarly interest in the empirical study of urban altruism. Ms. Genovese was stabbed repeatedly in the parking lot of her home while her neighbors ignored her cries for help. The fact that neighbors who had opportunities to aid a person in need elected not to do so fueled national outrage and spawned a nearly 20 year-long social scientific effort to understand the ways in which urbanicity informs socio-moral development. Drawing heavily from sociological literatures, this new body of scholarship on urban altruism suggested that for people who reside in America's largest urban centers, exposure to urban sprawl, overcrowding, economic and housing instability, failing social and cultural institutions, and crime results in a life marked

by considerable stress. Zimbardo (1969), in his proposed Deindividuation Theory, suggested that the overcrowding and overwhelming social stimulation experienced in urban settings lead to a loss of selfhood and self-restraint among urban-residing individuals resulting in an increased likelihood of antisocial involvement, and a reduced likelihood of prosociality (e.g., altruism).

In contrast with Deindividuaton Theory, Latané and Darley (1970) offered a Social Inhibition Theory which posited that urbanicity promotes diffusion of social responsibility and, by extension, social disengagement. It follows, then, that individuals who are socially disengaged are less likely to sacrifice on behalf of others. Finally, Milgram (1970) offered an Urban Overload Hypothesis that asserts that the sheer enormity of human need encountered in urban settings is overwhelming. Milgram asserted that, over time, urban-residing individuals become besieged by the needs of their fellow citizens, but find that they have few clear heuristics for determining when to help, whom to help, or the markers that signify that help is needed. Further, for potential helpers who reside in urban settings, the desire to assist others is complicated by an ever-present sense of physical and emotional vulnerability (e.g., fear that they will be physically hurt if they extend themselves to others). According to Milgram, “overload is made more manageable by limiting the span of sympathy” (1970, p. 1463). That is, he theorized that urban residents embrace norms of non-involvement because of a need to limit the range of people to whose needs they must attend.

More recently, social scientists have suggested that “middle-class flight” from urban settings has reduced the number of prosocial exemplars available to urban-residing youth and adults, and eroded key forms of social capital including social trust (Atkins and Hart 2003; Chung 2004; Hart and Atkins 2002; Sampson and Lauritsen 1994). According to this argument, without the presence of pro-social models, negative (i.e., anti-social) models take their place. Those who lament the disproportionate concentration of poor families in America's large cities often support the notion that middle-class flight erodes social capital and creates a vacuum of prosociality. However, this assertion problematically equates middle-class status with prosociality, and lower-income status with anti-sociality. Moreover, this argument fails to recognize the reality that lower-income and lower status individuals (acting individually or as members of religious, social or political institutions) have been potent models of prosociality throughout history (Gallup and Jones 1992).

The portrait of urban relational life advanced in Deindividuation, Social Inhibition, Urban Overload and recent sociological theories of middle-class flight is dismal. However, evidence for these theories is, at best, equivocal. Consistent with Deindividuation, Social Inhibition, and Overload theories, some studies have found that urban residents are less altruistic (e.g., less likely to mail a “lost” letter to a neutral addressee or a person involved in a seemingly immoral profession) than rural and suburban residents (Hansson and Slade 1977). Studies also have found that conditions such as population heterogeneity (Halohan 1977), and population size and density (the number of people per square mile) (Amato 1983; Bridges and Coady 1996; Halohan 1977; Levine et al. 1994) that are associated with urbanicity are inversely related to altruism. Further, unemployment, a stressor that is positively correlated with urbanicity, has been found to be negatively associated with altruism (Levine et al. 1994).

Contrary to extant urban overload theories, however, empirical studies have found no correlation between altruism and key indicators of urban overload. More specifically, no relationship has been found between altruism (e.g., giving a donation to a cause; and/or helping a person with an injured leg) and residential instability (Amato 1983), social class or the per capita income of the community, or “pace of life” (Amato 1983; Levine et al. 1994). Further, in contrast to the overload thesis, a number of empirical studies have found higher

levels of altruism in urban environments than in rural ones (Bridges 1996; Weiner 1976). Individuals raised in urban areas are also more open to and tolerant of interpersonal differences and are more willing than their rural counterparts to assist socially marginal individuals (Hansson and Slade 1977). Weiner (1976) speculates that the willingness of urban residents to assist socially marginal individuals may reflect a greater degree of exposure to, and a greater capacity to process, cognitively complex social information (e.g., racial, linguistic and ideological diversity).

Though rich, the research on urban altruism is hampered by a number of conceptual and methodological limitations, some of which may have contributed to discrepancies in findings. First, the field has focused heavily on contrasting the relative level of altruism among urban, rural, and suburban-residing individuals, but has revealed little about the factors that may promote altruism within urban communities. Second, studies of urban altruism have relied almost exclusively on experimental and quasi-experimental designs (see Moser and Corroyer 2001 for an exception) that have placed participants in staged situations. Importantly, the reliance on staged or hypothetical events provides us with insight into only a limited range of altruistic behaviors (e.g., the willingness to engage in charitable giving), and leaves unexamined a range of behaviors that are likely to emerge in real world contexts (e.g., helping a neighbor who is in need). Further, the reliance on staged and hypothetical events raises important concerns about ecological validity (i.e., the relevance of these findings to 'real world' situations in which the context of helping may be more variable and more dependent on spontaneous action). Finally, as Amato (1983) and Levine et al. (1994) note, the tasks employed in studies of urban altruism vary in their place in the taxonomy of altruism (giving vs. doing; planned vs. spontaneous action; serious vs. not serious events; and personal vs. anonymous action). The variations in the tasks that comprise altruism in these studies limit our ability to compare findings across studies.

In light of these limitations, the present study endeavors to advance extant theories of altruism by using qualitative techniques to address a single question: "What are the individual level and broader ecological factors that catalyze and sustain altruism in low-income urban contexts?" In addressing this question we ask participants from a low-income urban community to reflect on events that have actually transpired rather than on staged or hypothetical situations.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 40 adults (22 men, 18 women) ranging in age from 23 to 90 years who are residents of, or intimately connected through work or family relationships to, a single, low-income public housing community (Hassledorn Houses[1]) in New York City. Hassledorn Houses is a complex of buildings in New York City that spans several square blocks and is home to more than 2,000 families. Approximately 50% of adults in Hassledorn Houses have earned at least a high school diploma or GED. The families who reside in this housing community meet the federal definition of poverty. New York City census data revealed that the median annual household income for families in the Hassledorn Houses is under $13,000. Despite the low median family income, more than 50% of women and more than 40% of men in Hassledorn are employed. The median family size is 4, all participants in the present study are parents to at least one child, and all are members of the African diaspora (African American, Afri-Caribbean, Afro-Latino).

[1]The names of the housing community and of individual participants, as well as all identifying information (e.g., age, countries of origin) have been changed in the effort to protect the anonymity of study participants.

A community-based partnership approach was used in this study (Fantuzzo et al. 2006). Prior to beginning data collection, the Principal Investigator (PI) spent several months in the community developing relationships with residents and community stakeholders (e.g., residents, ministers, small business owners). Consistent with the principles of genuine partnership, the research team worked with residents and community stakeholders to identify questions that would be of interest to members of the community, and community needs that might be served by the team. Community stakeholders also reviewed study materials (e.g., the interview protocol) and participated in refining and rewriting interview questions. The PI and members of the research team served as volunteers in a range of capacities including, but not limited to, working as chaperones for a local summer camp, developing a library in a local community center, and leading workshops for parents. Volunteering in the community allowed us to learn about the history of the community and allowed community members to assess the credibility of the research team.

Fliers for the study were posted in public spaces throughout the community (e.g., on public bulletin boards in local barbershops, nail salons, and the local community center). In addition, community residents and stakeholders were informed about the content of the study and asked for their assistance in informing others in the community about the study (e.g., distributing fliers about the study to community members particularly to individuals whom they perceived as especially altruistic). Interviews were scheduled with individuals who contacted the PI. Fifty-two people consented to be interviewed. Twelve interviews were not conducted either because of scheduling difficul-ties or because the interviewees consistently failed to appear for interviews. Participants were interviewed in a private room in the local community center or, if they preferred, in their place of employment. Interviews were conducted by dyads comprising the PI and a trained research assistant. All interviews were audio-taped, and lasted 90-120 minutes. Each participant received a $25 gift for participation in the interview.

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and these transcripts were used for all qualitative analyses. Verbatim responses to two questions and subsequent probes were analyzed for this study: (1) “Please tell me about a specific situation in which you saw (or heard about) someone in this community going out of their way to do something to help someone else,” and (2) “Please tell me about a time in the past year when you went out of your way to help someone who is not related to you.” The two follow-up probes that focused on the motivations for behaving altruistically were: “What do you think made them do —?” and “What made you do —?” If responses to these probes suggested that helpful actions were motivated principally by a quest to fill self-serving desires (e.g., to obtain material rewards), then the actions were deemed non-altruistic, and narratives regarding motivation for these actions were excluded from the analysis.

Two trained coders conducted line-by-line readings of the full text of all transcripts. In order to reduce the likelihood of bias in (and increase the validity of) the coding and interpretative processes, coders were selected who were not involved in either the data collection process or in conducting volunteer work in the Hasseldorn community. All coding was done by hand (i.e., no qualitative analysis software packages were used). An open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was employed with phrases used as the units of analysis. In order to adjust for differences in participants' narrative styles (e.g., for the tendency of some participants to repeat ideas), for each participant we recorded the presence or absence of each theme rather than the frequency of occurrence of each theme. In the first stage of the coding process each coder independently identified emergent descriptive themes from all of the transcripts. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), these initial set of themes were compared and integrated into a comprehensive list of coding categories. Coders then discussed the meaning

of each coding category, the interrelationships among the categories, and rules for determining when a particular response should or should not be coded as an exemplar of each category. Following these discussions, the initial set of coding categories was refined into clearly defined, non-overlapping coding categories. The two coders assessed the reliability of the coding scheme using narrative samples that were randomly selected from four of the interviews. After each effort to establish reliability the coders clarified the rules for applying the codes. Agreements were defined as any instances in which coders assigned the same code to a narrative passage. Disagreements were defined as any instances in which coders assigned different codes to a passage of narrative, or one coder neglected to code a given passage. In order to reduce the likelihood of errors in coding, at the beginning of each coding review session coders reviewed the transcripts to verify that (1) all codable passages had an assigned code, and (2) they were committed to the codes that they had assigned to each passage. Consistent with Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations, inter-rater reliability was calculated using the formula: Inter-rater Reliability = Agreement/(Agreement + Disagreement) and a target rate of 85% reliability was used as the lowest acceptable level of inter-rater reliability for the study. The rate of reliability for this study was 87%.

Results

Thirty-nine of the 40 participants described altruistic actions. Interestingly, the one participant who did not explicitly describe having engaged in altruistic activities was well known in the community because he had taken custody of and raised a number of children from the community who were in danger of being placed in foster care, and because he founded a community program for children and parents which he funds almost completely out of-pocket.

In keeping with Overload theories, participants reported encounters with police brutality, gang violence, limited job options, financial stress, and chronic illness. Against this backdrop, the altruistic activities in which participants, their families, friends, and neighbors engaged included saving the life of someone who was in danger; taking permanent custody of, or providing temporary care for, the children of neighbors; providing housing for homeless individuals and families; intervening to protect others from crime or violence; and providing money, food, clothes, guidance, and encouragement to others.

Fourteen categories captured the themes that emerged from the content analysis of interviewees' discussions of the factors that they believed motivated these acts of altruism. These categories were further reduced into 4 overarching motives: (1) needs-based motives; (2) norm-based motives; (3) motives based in abstract moral principles; and, (4) sociopolitical motives (see Table 1). These motives and their representative categories are described below along with exemplar quotes from the transcripts.

Needs-Based Motives

Two categories of response indicated that altruism is motivated by a quest to respond to the needs of others: a quest to respond to (1) individuals' needs, and (2) the needs of social groups.

Response to an individual's needs—Seventy-four percent of participants reported that they or others behaved altruistically in an effort to respond to the emotional, material or physical needs of specific individuals. Sometimes altruism resulted when participants

weighed their long-term needs against the immediate needs of others. For example, Diane[2] stated:

> The lady that I was telling you about before,… there were times when she did not have money to buy certain things that was essential… She did not know what she would've done… And, sometimes it's like, it could be like my last $10 or so for the week before I get paid. You know, [I] just give it to her ‘cause I figure, you know, she really does need it more than I do…

For Diane, and for other participants, direct contact with people who were in need led to an empathic response, and to a decision to help. Although Diane and others whose narratives fit this category of response were not always clear about how they would address their own material or emotional needs once they had given their resources to others, they believed that a way would be made for them either by divine intervention or by force of fate.

Response to a group's or community's needs—Seventy-four percent of participants reported that their own and others' altruism emerged in response to the needs of collectives (e.g., youth or seniors in the community). Some individuals planned events to benefit families, youth, elders, or other groups. Others appropriated resources that they then distributed to needy families or they broke rules in order to provide crucial resources or services to those who were in need. Diane described the actions of a neighbor who confiscates food from a local community center and distributes the food to hungry families in Hassledorn Houses. She stated:

> She'll take [leftover milk and sandwiches] back to her building… and distribute them to neighbors. You know, some of the neighbors that are less fortunate. Like, there's …[a] lady that has like eight kids…She'll take them milk and feed them and stuff. And she'll say to me, “I don't even eat it but, you know, just for it not to go to waste… [S]he know that there are people there that need it….

For those whose responses fit into this category of codes, altruism was motivated not solely or principally by an empathic response to the needs of individuals, but by a belief in the vulnerability of particular social groups (e.g., youth), and a desire to counteract what the altruist perceived as the community's apathy toward the plight of those groups. For example, in explaining his own tendency to mentor girls, Kevin stated: “I favor females over males. … I see that they need some of the more critical things because they're more a victim than men are.”

Norm-Based Motives

Ten coding categories reflected norm-based motives for altruism. The ten categories were reduced into three sub-categories of norm-based motives: motives based on (1) religious and spiritual ideological norms; (2) relational norms; and (3) character or personality—centered norms.

Altruism Motivated by Religious and Spiritual Norms

Altruism Motivated by Ideological Norms: Religion—Religious doctrine and faith were identified by 49% of participants as factors that motivated selfless behaviors. Some participants cited passages from particular sacred texts (e.g., the Bible) that they believe reflect the importance of selfless giving. Darryl, stated, for example:

> Everything what I do for a person— … started from a Christian—it is from the heart. I would not do— it's never, `what could I, what could I get?' … God taught

[2]Pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript in order to protect the identity of participants.

> us to be gentle, right? To be kind… [T]here's a part of the Bible that stated…He told them, "When I was hungry you did not give me anything to eat. When I was thirsty you did not give me nothing to drink." …And they said, "Lord, we have never seen you before."… He said, 'Yes, you have. You have seen me everyday.' So when I deal with people I don't know exactly who I am running into. I don't know if I am running into Him.

One might conjecture that Darryl's behavior reflects not altruism, but a desire to gain favor with God in order to ensure a place in Heaven. However, at no point in his interview did Darryl assert that it was important to help others because doing so would ensure salvation. Importantly, the fact that Darryl did not point to his good deeds as a vehicle for earning salvation or divine favor is consistent with the Christian belief that individuals are saved by divine grace and not by their own deeds. Darryl's actions and the Biblical passage that he cites appear to reflect a belief that a way of honoring God's command to be good to each other is to see the divinity in each person we meet (i.e., to remember that we don't know if we are "running into Him").

Altruism Motivated by Ideological Norms: Spirituality—Thirty-eight percent of participants attributed altruism to spirituality. That is, they argued that efforts to care for the well-being of others were inspired, not by organized religion (e.g., specific religious texts), but by their personal relationship with a higher power or force, by their sense of the sacred, or by metaphysical experience of interconnectedness with other humans. These participants typically expressed an awareness of, and gratitude for, God's grace. For example, when asked to account for why she and others give selflessly to others, Andrea, stated:

> The way I see it is, if not for God we would not be here… You know, He breathes a breath of life in our body each day, you know, just to wake us up each day… So,… if He's doing that much for us, you know, the little things that we give of ourselves is like nothing… You know, it's nothing! So that's the least we can do in return.

Altruism Motivated by Relational Norms

Family Influence/Family Modeling—Sixty-two percent of participants attributed their altruism to the influence of family models (e.g., grandparents or fictive kin[3]) of altruism and kindness. Participants almost invariably had defining stories about having witnessed or having been the recipients of family altruism; many recalled direct or indirect familial exhortations regarding the importance of caring for others. What defined these motives as modeling was the deliberate effort of the actor to serve as an example for others (e.g., to teach others how to give), or the decision made by witnesses to or recipients of altruism to emulate the behavior of the altruist. From family members these participants learned how to identify the needs of others, how to respond to those needs, and to privilege care for the well-being of others over the pursuit of personal wants and needs. Importantly, the regularity with which family members cared for others helped to normalize the ethos of care.

Family stories of altruism were laden with a sense of gratitude, pride and awe, and seemed to serve at least two functions. First, they served as repositories of information about the specific ways in which family members helped to transform the lives of others. For example, participants recalled details regarding family members' efforts to provide resources (e.g., food, money) and solace to others. Second, these stories defined participants as a part of a legacy of care that helped to shape their identity, their choice of profession, and/or their commitment to treating people with care. In sum, these stories answered the questions: "who

[3]Given the focus on extended and fictive kin in African American communities, this category was also used to code for references to godparents, "play aunts," and play relatives (e.g., play sister).

am I?" "what is expected of me?" and "how do I want to live?" Angelina, for example, talked about how her mother's extraordinary acts of giving influenced her own professional choices (she is a social activist) and her lifelong commitment to caring for others. She stated:

> All my life I wanted to be like my mom. … She was a mother of communities of different people. Different cultures, different races. And, I have to say she was a doctor. She was a healer… She would just touch people and, as I was growing up, I knew I wanted to be like her… She has influenced me to do what I do in every possible way.

Modeling: Influence of strangers and acquaintances—Fifty-one percent of participants attributed altruism, in part, to having witnessed, or having been the recipients of, the altruism of individuals outside of the family (e.g., strangers, historical figures). Non-familial models of altruism appeared to cultivate a psychological sense of community. That is, direct and indirect encounters with strangers and neighbors who engaged in mundane or extraordinary acts of care created or reified a view of community as a place in which the fates of all community members are linked inextricably, and in which people have a responsibility to care for and respond to the needs of others. For example, Jude, who works in the community, linked his own altruism to his childhood experience with a neighbor. He stated:

> Miss Eva took care of me on the street… I could knock on Miss Eva's door and I could say, 'Miss Eva, I'm hungry.'… That's community. Neighborhood is 'I got mine, you go get yours'…. Somebody's killing somebody in the hallway, I lock my door…- that's neighborhood nonsense. Community is something different. Community is caring…

Ms. Eva's actions influenced Jude's belief that selfless acts of giving create community, and shaped his commitment to behave in ways that would construct community.

Jeannine explained that her own penchant for altruism was influenced by an encounter in which she and her three children were fed and cared for by a stranger whom she met in a subway station on the day that she and her children fled from her violent husband. Jeannine stated:

> This woman I did not even know and who did not even know me, she took the time to do this good thing. And I learned from that. I learned what we should be like with each other.

Reciprocation—For 62% of participants, memories of having receievd altruism were so infused with awe and gratitude that they were moved to reciprocate acts of kindness. Participants sometimes helped the specific individuals or families who had helped them. However, as an act of homage to their helpers, some individuals extended care to people other than those who had helped them. Participants also gave to others because they believed that life is circular, and that life's circularity means that everyone will be brought to a point of need. This category of motivation is distinct from modeling in that the goal of reciprocation is simply to give to others because something was given to the recipient. In modeling, the intent is to behave in ways that might be perceived as generous in order to serve as an example for others. Participants believed that by giving to others we create an ethos of care and connectedness that assures that life's challenges can be endured. For example, Franklin, stated: "People have been good to me. That's why I turned around and give to them, 'cause I remember."

Expression of or motivated by love—Thirty-six percent of participants attributed altruism to their devotion to and affection for others. Darryl asserted: “What I try to do now, giving back, I see people—that they need that little love and that's what's wrong.”

The notion that altruism serves as a radical alternative to a life of lovelessness and hopelessness was expressed by interviewees whose narratives fit into this category of responses.

Desire to effect change—Sixty-nine percent of participants reported that altruism was motivated by a belief that acts of goodness have transformative potential. For example, Diane, stated:

> When you see what people can do with your help, you know, what they can accomplish in life, you know, with the little help that you've given to them, you know they can go places…and make something of themselves…

In short, altruism is rooted in the conviction that beneficiaries of altruism have the capacity to synthesize even small acts of care into astonishing and sustainable change.

Altruism is Motivated by Character or Personality Norms

Personality or character trait—Fifty-six percent of participants indicated that altruism reflects an innate, immutable part of the identity of the altruist. Responses that fit this category described altruism as motivated by who one is rather than by empathy or situational factors. For example, Sophia, who volunteers time with senior citizens in the community, stated: “If I give it to you, I give it to you. … I'm not giving it to you because I know you need it. I'm giving it to you because…I'm being just that person I am. Without asking for it back, that's, that's me.”

Calling/purpose in life—Altruism was seen by 13% of participants as a calling or life purpose. Charles, who mentors children noted: “I really believe that that is one of my missions…some people believe that you are born with it, but I think to a certain extent you are born with a mission.”

Altruism Motivated by Abstract Moral Principles

General orientation toward humanism—Thirty-eight percent of participants explained that altruism was motivated by an unconditional regard for the sanctity of human life. These participants noted that the challenges and blessings that they encountered, and the events that they have witnessed over the course of their lives, helped them to craft a humanistic outlook. One man, Milton, recalled witnessing the brutally racist treatment of indigenous communities while he was living in Central America. That experience sparked his commitment to a life of selfless giving to members of this community. When asked to explain his choice, Milton said: “My mother taught me to fear God and to—to live with people as human beings.”

Recognition of the humanity/worth of an individual or group—Thirty-six percent of participants reported that altruism is the result not of a general orientation toward humanism, but a recognition of the humanity and worth of a specific person or group of people. Participants noted that social biases (e.g., classism, racism) can lead us to dehumanize and or ignore the plight of certain individuals. Jude linked his own altruism toward people who are poor to his awareness of the class dynamics between people who live in private houses in the community and those who live in public housing (e.g., Hasseldorn Houses). Jude stated:

> You get the people in the houses, and they'll say things like ‘those project people’ … meaning ‘those bad people’ … They are people who might not be as economically privileged as you are, and have to have their housing subsidized by housing authority, but they aspire to the same things you do. … I find a special place in my heart for those that are under-served … cause it's perception about ‘project people’.

In sum, Jude's altruism is rooted in a rejection of the class-biased view that people who are poor hold different (and less acceptable) values, and interests than those who are more privileged.

Similarly, Tammy asserted that low-income as well as drug addicted individuals often are ignored, dehumanized, and or rejected by others. She stated:

> I know one young lady who was… a “crack head.” … and no matter how many times she came to me I would never turn her away. You understand? And that lady is straight today… Even if she came to the house for some food or whatever… Where other people would just [say]…, ‘Get away from here!’ Shut the door. ‘What are you doing here?’… You gotta really look at people and not, not look past that.

Tammy's altruism was motivated by a belief in honoring the worth of all individuals.

Altruism is Motivated by Sociopolitical Factors

Giver's or receiver's social location—Eighteen percent of participants asserted that social location (e.g., wealth, marginalization) motivates altruism. These individuals noted that wealth, poverty, and experiences with various forms of discrimination inform peoples' ability to appreciate what is truly valuable in life, and their ability to learn how to care for and give to others. Alicena, for example, stated:

> [Y]ou know, you got some people who's got prestige and they are in a position to do things for other people and they won't… But, you got people that have nothing that's willing to give… you know, a kind word… I guess because we know, the poor know what a struggle is. You know. Some people born rich with a silver spoon in their mouth, they have everything, but really they have nothin'.

Alicena highlights the point that social class influences altruism in ways that are sometimes counterintuitive. Indeed, she noted that those who have less and those who are most vulnerable often give more.

Discussion

Deindividuation, Social Inhibition, and Urban Overload theories insist that chronic overexposure to community-level stressors (e.g., overcrowding), chronic competition for scarce resources, social isolation, and social institutions that fail to meet the needs of the community's most vulnerable members, lead individuals to a propensity for aggression and a tendency to avoid extending themselves to improve the lot of others. Although the participants in this study encounter a range of challenges associated with life in a low-income urban community (e.g., financial stress, crime, police brutality), these urban-residing adults engaged in, witnessed, and experienced everyday acts of care. The goal of this study was to elucidate community members' subjective beliefs about the factors that motivated their own altruistic actions, as well as the altruistic actions of others in the community.

Our findings suggest that, although rich, early work on urban prosociality lapsed into an overly deterministic view of social ecology, and in doing so, obscured the array of factors

that inform peoples' decisions to care for others. Indeed, the motives revealed by our analyses were, to a large degree, consistent with the multidimensional (i.e., allocentric, normocentric, and axiological) motivational framework outlined by Oliner (2002) and Smolenska and Reykowski (1992). However, one category of motives (i.e., sociopolitical motives) emerged from our analyses that did not fit neatly with Smolenska and Reykowski's (1992) three broad motivational frames. That is, we found that some participants in this study attributed altruism to their own social location (e.g., class status) or the social location of the recipient of altruism.

The need-based (i.e., allocentric) themes that emerged from the narratives indicated that people are motivated to behave altruistically when they become aware either of the needs of individuals or the needs of social groups (e.g., youth). Consistent with existing research on the role of empathy and perspective-taking in motivating altruism (see Batson et al. 2002; Batson and Shaw 1991; Lee et al. 2005; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Smolenska and Reykowski 1992; Underwood and Moore 1982) those who had direct contact with individuals in need were moved to engage in altruistic action because of compassion for these individuals, or because they were able to imagine the world from the vantage point of the particular person in need. For those who were motivated to behave altruistically towards social groups, altruism was motivated not by empathy or direct contact, but by a general belief in the vulnerability of particular social groups, and a desire to counteract what the altruist perceived as society's apathy toward the plight of those social groups.

The norm-based (i.e., normocentric) motives that emerged from the narratives in this study fell into three domains: ideologically driven norms; norms rooted in personality, character or calling; and relationally derived norms. For participants whose altruism was rooted in ideology, the decision to care for others was steeped either in religiosity and or in spiritual ideals (e.g., a belief in the sacredness of life). This finding is not surprising given the centrality of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African American and low-income communities (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Mattis 2002; Taylor et al. 2004), and given previous findings of a correlation between religiosity and altruism (Johnson et al. 1989; Lee et al. 2005). However, since not all people who profess to be spiritual or religious are altruistic, the field will benefit from research that explores the specific process(es) by which spirituality and religiosity inform altruism and how those processes are influenced by urban stressors.

The norm-based motives that were rooted in relationships highlighted the complex ways in which relational life influences the evolution of altruism. Consistent with other studies (e.g., Oliner and Oliner 1988; Sorokin 2002) some participants in this study behaved altruistically because, over a lifetime, they witnessed or received the kind and selfless action of family members and or strangers. Importantly, our participants also noted the powerful vicarious influence of historical figures who modeled the value of altruism (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X). However, our findings extend theories regarding the roles of social modeling and relationships in altruism in two ways.

First, our findings suggest that it may be important to distinguish between the influence of family members who model altruism and the influence of *narratives* about these family members. For participants, family models seemed to serve as evidence of the importance and achievability of altruism, and to encourage norms of selflessness. However, the narratives constructed about these models seemed to also shape identity. That is, these narratives about family altruists seemed to reflect and reify participants' views of themselves as a part of a legacy of caring to which they are connected permanently and intimately. The link between narrative and identity has been richly developed by McAdams (2001). In addition, McAdam's life narrative theory has been applied to the study of adolescent moral

exemplars (see Matsuba and Walker 2005). However, studies of urban altruism have not examined how people weave a lifetime of experience with the stress of urban life, with related or accompanying memories, emotions, and cognitions to create a coherent sense of self. Studies using a variety of narrative methods to determine how relational (particularly altruistic) identities are formed, and that seek to determine how people match their 'storied' identities with their behaviors may be useful.

Second, our findings regarding the motivating influence of relationships suggest that family models of altruism function differently from models who are strangers and acquaintances. Family models of altruism appear to shape identity while stranger altruism appears to reinforce a psychological sense of community. This finding is crucial in that it raises the possibility that the feelings of insularity and vulnerability that Zimbardo, Latane and Darley, and Milgram identified as the inevitable consequence of urbanicity may be mitigated by the sense of community that people feel when they are cared for unexpectedly by strangers. Second, it suggests that stranger altruism may be a catalyst of social capital (e.g., social trust, reciprocity) in low-income, urban communities. This theorized inoculating effect of stranger altruism is worthy of empirical attention. For example, scholars might benefit from exploring the extent to which the relationship between urban stress and altruism is mediated by lifetime encounters with stranger altruism. Further, it may be worthwhile to explore the extent to which psychological sense of community mediates the relationship between encounters with stranger altruism and personal willingness to behave altruistically.

The finding that altruism is motivated by norms rooted in personality, character, or calling raises important questions. Scholarly efforts to determine whether altruism reflects a particular disposition (i.e., personality style) are on-going (see Batson 1991; Krebs and Hesteren 1992; Rushton et al. 1981; Oliner and Oliner 1988). We have yet to determine, however, whether scholars and community members ascribe the same or different meanings to the term personality. Further, in the absence of studies that examine the stability of altruistic behaviors across situations and contexts, it is not clear whether altruism can truly be characterized as representing a feature of personality. Future studies should inquire about the process by which individuals distinguish between altruistic behaviors and altruistic traits, and should explore the extent to which expressions of altruism are influenced by situational and contextual factors.

Two abstract moral (i.e., axiological) motives emerged from the narratives. The first of these responses indicates that altruism results from a general humanistic orientation. The second category suggests that altruism is motivated by participants' recognition of the worth of specific individual. The humanism that motivates altruism among the participants emerges out of religious and spiritual values, out of the lessons that they have learned from family, from experiences with strangers, and from their own encounters with care as well as discrimination over a lifetime. These findings beg the need for studies that further explore the interrelationship between and among the various motives for altruism.

A particularly important contribution of this study of urban altruism is its identification of sociopolitical motives for altruism (and its elucidation of the interrelationships between sociopolitical, needs-based, abstract moral and norm-based motives). In contrast to early research on urban altruism that characterized poverty and other correlates of urbanicity as factors that mitigate altruism and promote social disorganization, our findings indicate that, for some individuals, poverty and marginal social positionality may be catalysts for altruism. Echoing Berkowitz's (1969) and Gruder et al.'s (1978) findings, participants noted an important social reality: social position and social biases play powerful roles in determining who is perceived as worthy of care, as well as who is likely to receive help. A number of individuals recalled periods in their lives when they (or intimate others) were addicted to

drugs, incarcerated, involved in illicit activities, or designated as pariahs in their community. As they moved into and out of locally defined hierarchies of marginality, these individuals were either turned away or helped by people who witnessed their need. These experiences helped participants to develop a sharpened awareness of the ways in which social biases such as classism influence peoples' sensitivity to the needs of others. Experiences of discrimination and support helped participants to develop an orientation towards humanism. We recall, here, Hansson and Slade's (1977) findings that individuals raised in urban areas appear to be more open to interpersonal differences, and more willing to assist socially marginal individuals, and their assertion that this tendency may result from urban residents' ability to negotiate cognitively the complexity of heterogeneous urban environments. The extent to which cognitive complexity contributes to the evolution of humanism, intergroup sensitivity, and to people's willingness to use their resources to care for others deserves greater empirical attention.

Interestingly, participants noted that people who have access to material resources and those who occupy privileged social and economic positions often fail to behave selflessly because they lack the moral courage to do so, or because the comforts of wealth and suburban life may lead them to become insular and psychologically fragile. In contrast, participants noted that for people who are poor, the willingness to behave altruistically depends on religious and or spiritual convictions, on recognizing that one's fate is tied inextricably to the fate of those who are in need, and on a conviction that one is capable of making a difference in the world. These assertions directly challenge the notion that middle-class flight from urban centers results in the loss of prosocial models. Our findings demonstrate the need for research that explores the degree to which experience with social marginality and discrimination motivates individuals to behave altruistically towards others who are socially marginal.

As with all studies there are factors that limit and or complicate the findings of this study. First, the relatively small sample and the fact that data were collected in a single community in New York City certainly limit the extent to which we can make general claims about individuals' motivations for altruism. Second, as is the case in any study of altruism, questions can be raised about the motivations of the actors involved. How can we know that any actor's motives are truly altruistic? This is an inescapable concern for those who study altruism. In studies of altruism it is all too easy to ignore the question of motivation and assume that acts of kindness and sacrifice are necessarily altruistic. In this study, however, we were careful to include follow-up probes (e.g., “What do you think made them do —?”) that focused on the motivations for the behaviors described by participants. If responses to these probes or to spontaneously offered narratives suggested that actions were self-serving (e.g., motivated by a desire for material rewards), then the actions were deemed non-altruistic, and narratives regarding these actions were not coded. This approach provided us with some measure of confidence that the actions described by participants met the definition of altruism (i.e., voluntary acts, that are intended to improve the welfare of others, and that are undertaken without an a priori interest in receiving rewards). Finally, we note that some participants were included because they were identified as having a particularly pronounced history of altruistic engagement. This recruitment strategy ensured the inclusion of participants who might have been missed if they had not been nominated. However, individuals who were nominated by others may be a unique group of exemplary altruists (i.e., more altruistic than the average person). As such, the perspectives offered by these individuals may not be generalizable to others within their immediate community, or in New York City's African diasporic community. Importantly, we acknowledge that although crucial in establishing credibility, the community partnership approach may have influenced various stages of the research process. However, this partnership approach and the use of

coders who were not involved in the data collection process increased the validity and confirmability of our analytic and interpretative work.

This work also has potentially important applications. First, given the misperception that altruism is anomalous in low-income urban communities, interventionists may find it particularly valuable (i.e., reinforcing) to focus a spotlight on those adults and youth in the community who are engaged in altruistic activities. By publicly recognizing the existence of altruists, interventionists may transform outsiders' as well as insiders' views of low-income communities (i.e., promote the view of low-income urban residents as capable of goodness). Second, although altruism exists in low-income, urban settings, interventionists may further promote altruism in low-income, urban settings by priming one or more motives among individuals who do not have a history of altruism. More specifically, interventionists may prime these individuals' awareness of the needs of others (allocentric motives), their religious/ spiritual, and familial/relational values (normocentric motives), themes of justice and humanism (axiological motives), and or reflections on the role of social position, discrimination, and social power in determining who is cared for (socio-political motives). Furthermore, interventionists might develop programs of intervention that encourage the use of life narratives as a path to altruistic actions. These narrative-based interventions may help people to cull personal and family memories and lifetime experiences with kindness, care, and discrimination into coherent self stories that solidify their identities as individuals who are committed to caring for others. Individuals who experience synergy between their identities and their behavior may be more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors.

This work also has important implications particularly for those who have an interest in the link between social capital and prosocial engagement. Social disorganization theories are grounded in the view that particular community-level phenomena (e.g., neighborhood instability, poverty, crime) erode social capital and consequently decrease the likelihood that community members will behave altruistically. These theories are compelling because they argue convincingly for a link between social ecology, social capital, and prosocial behavior. However, Hutchinson's (2004) work on civic engagement in low-income urban communities reminds us that in these communities social capital often is produced, and often functions, in ways that run counter to the expectations of social capital theory. In fact, she found that contrary to the tenets of social capital theory, it was fear wrought by life in a high crime context and not trust and safety that prompted information sharing, communication, and community involvement among residents of a low-income, inner-city neighborhood. Further, contrary to theory, she found that the community members who were most involved in positive community transformation activities were the ones who reported the lowest level of trust in their neighbors.

Taken together with Hutchinson's work, our findings suggest the need to explore the complex and perhaps unexpected ways that social capital develops and functions in low-income urban communities. For example, it might be useful to examine the role of personal and community isolation and marginalization in the alchemy of social capital and altruism. Further, it may be useful to investigate how positive as well as negative ecological forces work in tandem with cultural and social systems (e.g., religious institutions, families), interpersonal relationships, and individual level factors (e.g., values) to produce both social capital and altruism.

Taken together, the findings of this study point to a nuanced model of urban altruism. We agree with Milgram and others that residents of low-income urban communities are at significant risk of urban overload. However, we caution that whether ecological risks lead to disengagement or to altruism depends on a range of cultural, relational, ideological, affective and structural factors. Individuals at risk for overload may be prompted to behave

altruistically by cultural, religious, spiritual, and family values, and a lifetime of experiences of being cared for in relationships with family, friends and strangers. Further, despite the risks that come with urban overload (e.g., the risk of vulnerability) people's reflections on the ways that marginalization informs who receives care may inspire them to behave altruistically. Finally, the experiences of awe, gratitude and hope that come from having witnessed or having benefited from the altruism of others may inspire individuals to care for those who are in need. Future work must examine the complex processes by which community-level and more proximal factors work together to produce altruism in urban and low-income communities. Without this work we have little hope of crafting theories that envision low-income, urban communities as spaces where people construct loving relationships and where individuals routinely and voluntarily engage in acts of altruism.

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Table 1

Percent endorsement of categories of motivations for altruistic behavior (n = 39)

Needs-Based Motives	
1. Response to individual needs: Altruism is motivated by an awareness of the emotional, material, financial, physical or other needs of individuals. *Example: "She didn't have anyone to turn to. She really needed someone to be there for her."*	74%
2. Response to community needs: Altruism emerges out of an effort to respond to a group or community need, or is a response to a persistent societal-level problem, or the inefficacy of existing social institutions. *Example: "Nobody does anything for the kids around here. Someone has to step up."*	74%
Norm-based Motives: Ideological Norms	
3. Religion: Altruism is motivated by religious doctrine (e.g., Bible) or by a specific doctrinal belief. *Example: "In the good book, Jesus Christ says we should love each other as we love ourselves."*	49%
4. Spirituality: Altruism is inspired not by particular religious doctrine or religious organizations but by a higher power (e.g., God), sense of the sacred, or by explicitly metaphysical experience of interconnectedness of the species. *Example: "I feel like I was being guided by God to do what I did."*	38%
Relational Norms	
5. Family influence: Altruism is inspired by a familial example of altruism, familial messages and commands, or from one's upbringing within his/her home. Family, here, includes extended and fictive kin. *Example: "I watched my grandmother do these things and it made me want to live that way."*	62%
6. Influence of strangers and acquaintances: Altruism is motivated by examples or exhortations of authority figures other than family. *Example: "This woman I didn't even know…, she took the time to do this good thing. And I learned from that. I learned what we should be like with each other."*	51%
7. Quest for reciprocation: Altruism is motivated by a need to reciprocate a specific act of kindness, or the need to pay back general kindnesses received over the years. *Example: "He took care of my kids when I was in a bad place, so when I had the chance to help him out, I just had to."*	62%
8. Expression of love; motivated by love: Altruism is motivated by love. *Example: "I love my people. That's why I did it!"*	36%
9. Desire or effort to change others: Altruism is motivated by a desire to change others (e.g., to encourage a change in another's approach to life; to boost others' confidence or empower them to take charge of their lives). *Example: If you do just a little bit for people you see how much it can change their lives."*	69%
Personality and Character Norms	
10. Personality or character trait or natural response; default behavior: Altruism stems from an enduring, innate, and/or predetermined characteristic of personality. Altruism is justified a priori; is an inherent part of human nature; is simply easier than any alternative, or is a requirement of being human. *Example: "This is just who I am. This is how I have always been."*	56%
11. Calling/purpose in life: Altruism has either been revealed as the cosmically or divinely-ordained reason for the individual's existence, or has been accepted as a calling. *Example: "This is what I am here to do."*	13%
Motives Based on Abstract Moral Principles	
12. General humanistic orientation: Altruism results from a respect and or a compassionate concern for the human beings. *Example: "It makes me sad that human beings would have to live like this."*	38%
13. Humanism: focused on the humanity of an individual or group: Altruism is the result of recognizing the humanity of a specific person or social identity group. *Example: "She is just like me."*	36%
Altruism Motivated by Sociopolitical Factors	
14. Social location: Altruism is motivated by social position (e.g., class status, gender, sexual identity, and experience of privilege or discrimination). *Example: "We women know what it is to need and have no one there for us. That's why we give more, because we know."*	18%